DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 943 CG 019 475

AUTHOR	Grossnickle, Donald R.
TITLE	High School Dropouts: Causes, Consequences, and Cure. Fastback 242.
INSTITUTION	Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind.
REPORT NO	ISBN-0-87367-242-9
PUB DATE	86
NOTE	28p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Eighth and Union, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402 ($0.90; $0.75 to Phi Delta Kappa members; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE	Reports - General (140)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Programs; Dropouts; High Risk Students; High Schools; *High School Students; Models; *Potential Dropouts; Program Development; *School Role

ABSTRACT

This booklet addresses the issue of high school dropouts. The dropout problem is briefly reviewed and dropout statistics are presented. A section on identifying the dropout lists early warning signs of potential dropouts and examines reasons for dropping out. Seven profiles of dropouts are included which provide personal insights, describe frustrations which led to the decision to leave school, and suggest the magnitude of the efforts needed to prevent dropouts. Key features of a comprehensive dropout prevention program are given and a variety of approaches used by schools to address the dropout problem are listed. Steps in planning a comprehensive dropout prevention program are enumerated and models of comprehensive programs are briefly described. Suggestions are made for how principals and teachers can help in the dropout prevention effort. References are included. (NB)

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High School Dropouts: Causes, Consequences, and Cure

Donald R. Grossnickle

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

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by
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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-61755
ISBN 0-87367-242-9
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the Wayne State University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which made a generous contribution to ward publication costs.

The chapter sponsors this fastback to honor Kenneth A. Bateman. Dr. Bateman has been an active member of Phi Delta Kappa since 1939 and serves as an invaluable resource to the chapter. It is with great pride that the chapter sponsors this fastback in honor of its own "Mr. Phi Delta Kappa."

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The Dropout Problem

The comprehensive high school is responsible for educating the bright and the not so bright students with different vocational and professional ambitions and with various motivations. It is responsible, in sum, for providing good and appropriate education, both academic and vocational, for all young people within a democratic environment.

—James B. Conant

School systems across the nation are searching for effective ways to counteract the high dropout rate, which current estimates put at 27% of those who enter high school. In 1984 alone, no less than 275 state-level groups wrestled with the dropout problem. Educators also are concerned that the push for excellence, calling for increased requirements, longer school day, and higher standards, will drive even more students out the door. As of 1985, 35 states had raised graduation requirements and 29 required passing a minimum competency test before graduation. A 1985 report, *With Consequences for All*, warns that "mandates can be blunt instruments for repair of schooling."

Coupled with educational reform must be equal concern for motivating students to stay in school because they like to be there, they see its usefulness, and they experience some form of success and achievement. We have not realized the American ideal of a free public education for all. Our nation is clearly "at risk" when large numbers of students leave before taking advantage of the opportunities schools have to offer.

Urban schools face even greater problems with dropouts. In Chicago the dropout rate is more than 40%, with one school reporting a 62.6% attrition rate. Detroit graduated barely one-third of the ninth-graders who entered high school in 1982. New York City reported that 45% of students who entered ninth grade in 1980 would no longer be in school by their senior year. Nationally, in 1985, three million seniors

walked across the stage to receive their diplomas, but about a million potential graduates did not.

Dropouts are not a new problem. The high school dropout rate in 1900 was 90%. In the 1930s only about one-third of the youth population completed high school. By 1950 the number who graduated had increased to 59%. In the 1970s the dropout rate continued to decrease, but it was still nearly 28% nationwide. Despite the gradual decrease in dropout rates, the problem is still with us. It cannot be ignored.

Solving the dropout problem will require a full-scale assault by committed school professionals working cooperatively with parents and community agencies. Schools can provide good programs and services, but they cannot guarantee that all students will avail themselves of what is provided. Nor can teachers undo or reverse the debilitating effects of unfavorable home conditions. What is required is the cooperation and involvement of the entire community working together on this complex and persisting problem. It will not be a simple or easy task.

The consequences of dropping out are severe not only for the individual but for society in general. Our society requires an educated and trained work force capable of competing in the world marketplace. Education is necessary to ensure a decent quality of life and to develop responsible citizenship. A high school education should be considered the minimum survival kit for coping with today's world.

Frightening statistics from juvenile courts indicate that dropouts are more likely to engage in criminal activities. In some states, 70% to 90% of the prison population consists of dropouts; 75% of those involved in juvenile court proceedings are dropouts.

Without adequate training, dropouts face a grim vocational future. Unemployment rates for dropouts far exceed those of high school graduates. And minority youth dropouts are at even a greater disadvantage in the workplace; Hispanic and black youth have twice the unemployment rate of white youth. Dropouts' hourly earning rates are from 7% to 21% less than those of high school graduates, according to a 1981 study conducted by Henry Levin at Stanford University. In 1981 dropouts earned an average of $60 less a week than those

who completed high school. Most dropouts who do find work are in low-skill jobs – jobs that rapidly are disappearing from the workplace. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, in 1982 there were five unskilled workers for every skilled worker on the General Motors production line. By 1990 that number is predicted to change to one unskilled worker for every skilled worker. In the decades ahead, it is predicted that 50% to 60% of the new and replacement jobs will require college-level preparation.

The crime and unemployment statistics cited above could be amplified many times over to document the consequences of dropping out, but statistics alone do not reveal those personal factors in the lives of young people that cause them to drop out. The next section will examine some of those factors – factors over which the schools may have some control.

Identifying the Dropout

Several researchers have developed lists of characteristics associated with students who eventually drop out. Such lists have value for the early identification of those students who are potential dropouts, but a caution is in order: Not every student who leaves school before graduation possesses these characteristics. Following are some of the common early-warning signs: Poor attendance; truancy; tardiness; consistently low grades; lack of basic skills, especially reading; home problems; poor communication between home and school; poorly developed organizational skills; a history of school transfers and family moves; poor social adjustment; failure to see relevance of education; inability to relate to authority figures; older sibling is a dropout or parent is a dropout; low self-esteem. This list is descriptive but offers little to explain *why* a student decides to leave school.

Reasons for Dropping Out

Probably the primary reason that students leave school early is that they are desperately trying to escape failure. Their decision never to return usually stems from an accumulation of school and home problems. Dropouts report they had simply "given up" because they were overwhelmed and "had it." In their mind, it was too late to get help. Their repeated attempts to be successful in school had ended in failure.

They felt no reason to care, especially when no one else did – parents, friends, or teachers!

Most dropouts have experienced numerous difficulties adjusting to the various demands of the school program, resulting in resentment and hostility toward school in general and teachers in particular. Many dropouts maintain a lifelong grudge against the education system, which in their view has failed them. Such an attitude sometimes persists when their own children go to school, thus perpetuating the dropout syndrome into the next generation.

Other dropouts claim to have outsmarted the system by escaping from an institution that they see as cruel, tedious, irrelevant, boring, and uncaring. Still others docilely succumb to academic defeat and look for some form of success and recognition outside of the school. Most who drop out leave behind a history of humiliation, indignation, and repeated failures and frustrations. They complain of lack of concern and individual attention, of an atmosphere of indifference, which leads to alienation, loneliness, and loss of hope. School is often described as a "worthless game not worthy of the time, frustration, pressure, or rewards."

Profiles of Dropouts

Neither lists of characteristics of dropouts nor scholarly analyses of reasons for dropping out are sufficient for understanding the true nature of the problem. In the final analysis, each case is individual and requires a thorough investigation of home background, school performance, and a detailed assessment of personality factors before effective intervention can be implemented. The seven profiles that follow provide personal insights that go beyond any stereotype we might have held about dropouts. Their case histories document the formidable struggles and repeated frustrations that led to their decision to leave school. Their case histories also suggest the magnitude of the efforts needed to prevent dropouts.

Ken. Ken was not a disruptive student, nor did he have a record of truancy. According to his teachers, his main problem was his failure to do his assignments. In his view, school was a big game, and

he saw little reason for doing his assignments. In truth, most assignments were too hard for him, and he often was embarrassed to ask for help. Ken had been held back in seventh grade and continues to have difficulty with reading and math. At 16, he read at a sixth-grade level and was barely able to handle multiplication problems in math.

Following his parents' divorce, Ken chose to live with his father, who also was a high school dropout. Ken's transition to high school was traumatic; he found the environment confusing and hostile. Because of his obesity, he was the object of teasing and had few friends. He stayed up late watching TV movies and, as a result, occasionally fell asleep in class.

When asked about school, he reported that even when he tried his best he seemed to fail. Teachers had little patience with him. They always seemed too busy to help him. Neither of his parents ever came to school for the annual parent conferences. According to Ken, they were "too busy or maybe didn't want to hear all the bad things they'd heard before." Ken admits that he will probably be sorry he dropped out and that his prospects for a good job are poor. For now, he thinks about getting a G.E.D. certificate and looking for a job.

Sara. In her junior year Sara was expelled from school for repeated incidents of fighting, including an altercation with her school dean. One day after being called to the dean's office for truancy, Sara reported, "The dean grabbed me so I turned around and just kicked him." Behind 1½ years in credits because of failing grades and frequent absences, Sara viewed being expelled from school as a "gift." Her parents reported they were at the end of their rope, too. The $10,000 they had spent on drug rehabilitation and counseling coupled with almost daily complaints from school were too much. "We have a life to live, too," they explained. School just was not for Sara.

Bill. By his sophomore year, Bill had become so disenchanted with his monotonous school program that he began cutting class regularly. He recalls that the year he dropped out he went to school no more than 60 days. Bill explains that since both his parents worked, "It was easy; I'd just cut out and go home to watch TV, get high with friends, or sleep all day. Nobody did anything about it." Bill's family had moved six times since kindergarten, and he reported that he had not

yet found a school he considered worth going to. The times he was in school were, in his opinion, "a waste of time." He often asked, "Why are we learning this?" He thought about going to see his counselor but decided, "why bother?" In his two years of high school, Bill saw his counselor for one 10-minute interview, despite failing several classes each semester. "At the end they called twice to tell me to come in and sign out, but I didn't." No one tried to talk Bill out of dropping out. In fact, it was easy; he just never came back.

Hector. An inner-city, 16-year-old Hispanic, Hector had this to say about his school: "Our school was a disaster. Gang fights and violence were everywhere. Drugs were sold and used by nearly everyone. Kids who did come to school weren't there for an education. Radios, friends, smoking cigarettes, girls, parties, that's what we came to school for. Lots of the kids had problems with the police. The teachers acted like zombies. Nobody took school seriously – parents, students, nobody. I never was good in school, but I never considered myself a loser. My old man is a loser – an alcoholic, no-good bum. Right now I'm just getting too old for school." The idea of a work-study program had initially interested Hector, but he did not pursue it. Working for a diploma did not seem important enough to be worth the trouble, he reasoned. Besides, he explained, "Nobody in my entire family has gone to school as long as I have."

Jim. Capable of being an honor student, Jim quit school at age 16½, much to the shock of everyone. Clean cut and from a suburban family with a new stepdad in residence, Jim did not fit the stereotype of a school dropout. His teachers and counselor were dismayed that a person with so much talent should throw it all away. Jim's parents admitted they could not control him anymore. He came and went as he pleased. "He's old enough to take care of himself," said his mother. Jim worked long hours at a pizza place. On his nights off, he often stayed out late drinking beer and smoking marijuana with friends. His boss at the pizza place promised to make him an assistant manager soon. Jim feels someday he might go back to school, but right now it's just not for him.

Barbara. At age 15, Barbara quit school in the fourth month of her pregnancy. She was afraid that the baby might be "damaged" due

to heavy drug use at the time of conception, but she has decided to keep the baby rather than have an abortion. Her boyfriend has denied that the baby is his. Barbara suspects it was her boyfriend who smashed the windshield of her mother's car as a threat to leave him out of this "mess." Barbara's mother is unemployed and on welfare. Their plan is to have the mother babysit and Barbara will get a job to support the three of them. Barbara does not see returning to school as an option for her. She feels that her problems with school were mostly her fault and does not blame her teachers or the school.

Otis. A black 16-year-old, Otis willingly dropped out, calling his school, "Just a joke." Gang activity was rampant. Most of his friends were in gangs and had just quit coming to school. According to Otis, being black and poor presents too many hurdles to overcome in a prejudiced society. "Even blacks with diplomas get discriminated against," he says. Otis reads on the fourth-grade level and has hated school and teachers for as long as he can remember. He was retained in first and sixth grades. To Otis, having some "good times" rather than teachers' dirty looks makes more sense. Otis lives in a project in Chicago and hopes to strike it rich with some scheme when it comes along. Otis' mother works in a dry cleaning shop; his father is never around. Otis is a good person, according to his grandmother, who lives with the family and continuously encourages him to make good. Otis likes sports but is not particularly good at any of them.

A review of the seven representative profiles above reveals a constellation of factors that impinge on the decision to drop out. Some are school related, some community related; many are family related. When all the factors are considered, we begin to realize the complexity of the dropout problem. No lasting solution to the dropout problem will be achieved by dealing with any of the factors in isolation. It will require a broad-based response from parents, teachers, administrators, researchers, community agencies, industry, and government working as a team.

There are no panaceas for reducing the dropout rate, but there are available abundant ideas and proven programs that can be adapted to local needs and resources. The remainder of this fastback will examine some of these approaches for dealing with the dropout problem.

The Search for Solutions

Key features of a comprehensive dropout prevention program include: awareness, commitment, coordination, allocating resources, and individualized attention to at-risk students. The first step is making teachers, administrators, school boards, and parents aware of the extent of the dropout problem and its causes and consequences. Those directly affected must understand the problem if they are to become involved in cooperative efforts. With understanding comes the commitment to engage in the planning and allocation of resources needed to deal with the particular problems of potential dropouts.

Schools are using a variety of approaches to address the dropout problem. They include:

- Adopting and enforcing attendance and truancy policies.
- Providing make-up and tutorial assistance.
- Fostering a school climate that promotes humanistic relationships.
- Providing early identification and remediation of academic failures.
- Expanding special services such as school social workers.
- Offering vocational and work-study programs.
- Providing homebound tutoring for pregnant students.
- Providing reading improvement labs and individualized and computer-assisted instruction.

- Establishing alternative schools.
- Providing inservice training for teachers on working with at-risk students.
- Working with police on gang activity.
- Establishing articulation with feeder schools.
- Setting up peer counseling programs.
- Offering night school and summer remediation programs.

Each of these approaches has merit, but to be effective they must be part of a comprehensive dropout prevention program designed to address local needs and problems. Planning such a comprehensive program involves the following steps:

1. Adopt a schoolwide philosophy to promote a positive learning environment that ensures the success of every student.
2. Assess needs by analyzing dropout statistics and by identifying major reasons why students drop out.
3. Implement a preventive dropout program that provides early identification of high-risk students.
4. Train teachers and counselors in intervention strategies that are effective with high-risk students.
5. Identify resources in the school and community that can be used to help students with special needs and problems.

Models of Comprehensive Dropout Programs

Principals in Oakland County, Michigan, requested assistance in lowering the statewide dropout rate of 24%. In response to their concerns, the Oakland County Attendance and Dropout Task Force was organized in 1982. The task force agreed on six premises to guide their work:

1. Early identification and intervention is most important.
2. Schools cannot solve the dropout problem alone; it is a home, school, and community problem and must be resolved by everyone working together.
3. A variety of strategies will be needed; there is no single solution to these problems.

4. A strong attendance policy is needed; however, it is recognized that a strictly enforced attendance policy is only one aspect of the dropout prevention program.
5. The Oakland County Task Force will serve as the catalyst in organizing local task forces in each of the 28 participating school districts.
6. The objectives of the Oakland County Task Force will be based on the needs of all 28 school districts; however, implementing specific programs will be the responsibility of the local school district.

The Oakland County plan involved three phases. Phase I (1983-84) was the establishment of the task force of 145 persons representing education, business/industry, community agencies, recent high school graduates, parents, law enforcement, civic organizations, and the religious community. Phase II (1984-85) was the establishment of an advisory coalition of 14 persons whose role is to exchange ideas and share information and resources and to develop a plan of action to assist the local schools. Phase III was devoted to organizing a task force in each school district whose responsibility is to identify funding sources, programs, and specialized personnel to serve all students in need.

The local task forces' emphasis is on early identification and intervention, with each school having a program for students who are encountering academic problems or who have personal/social problems that interfere with the learning process or with the development of a healthy self-concept. The goal is to provide every student with access to all the resources in the school and community in order to complete the educational program. Some of the proposals the Oakland County schools are considering are work experience programs in business and industry, community service programs, and adult continuing education programs.

Another type of comprehensive dropout program is one organized by the principal at Addison Trail High School in Addison, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. This program has three components: The first is what is called a MOD/reading program (MOD refers to a module

of time). Since so many students experience difficulty adjusting to high school, all freshmen are required to participate in the MOD program for the first semester instead of having a traditional study hall. Topics covered in the MOD program include: how-to study tips, reasons for staying in school, importance of grades, motivation and self-esteem, dealing with peer pressure, choices of extracurricular activities, behavior guidelines, guidance services, and drug awareness education. In addition, every freshman student is required to participate in a developmental or corrective reading program staffed by a reading specialist, who provides individual tutoring and computer-assisted instruction so students can progress at their own rate and level. The key to the success of the MOD program is an advisor who takes a personal interest in each freshman.

The second component of the Addison Trail dropout prevention program is the Pupil Personnel Committee composed of the psychologist, social worker, assistant principal, guidance director, dean, and special education department chair. This committee reviews referrals from teachers, deans, counselors, and parents and recommends individualized programs for at-risk students who have been identified as potential dropouts.

The third component of the program is for that small group of students unable to function successfully, even when provided with the services the high school has to offer. These students have the option of attending Ombudsman Educational Services, a for-profit alternative school founded in 1975 to serve those students whom no one else wants. The mission of the school is to retain at-risk students who would most likely drop out of traditional high schools. Students receive credits through learning contracts mutually developed by Ombudsman and Addison Trail staff. The following description of the philosophy and program of this alternative school is included because of the important lessons it provides for those who are initiating dropout prevention programs.

Ombudsman Educational Services Ltd., of Libertyville, Illinois, offers services to 10 "learning communities" in three states and boasts a 90% success rate in having its students graduate from high school. The school serves more than 500 students each year. In Illinois, school

districts sending students to Ombudsman are charged about $2,200, which is $500 less than the state's average per pupil expenditure. Fees are paid by the sending school district, which is reimbursed by the state.

The school's philosophy is reflected in its name – Ombudsman – a term used for a government official appointed to hear and investigate complaints by citizens about alleged abuses or capricious acts committed by public officials. In a similar fashion, this school works as an intermediary between parents/student and the sending schools to resolve problems that are causing students to fail. The school strives to identify each student's abilities and needs and to motivate students to accept the responsibility for achieving their own career goals.

The program design is highly individualized. Through a process of diagnostic testing, prescriptions, treatment, and evaluation, every student's educational needs are defined and addressed. The focus is on mastering basic skills. Goals are established in a learning contract drawn up by the sending school, Ombudsman staff, and the student and parents. Students are required to achieve 90% mastery of the goals before moving on to new goals.

The program uses many of the approaches of Glasser's Reality Therapy, which seeks to replace school failure with success. No external rewards are used for motivation. The feeling is that such rewards interfere with the intrinsic value of learning outcomes and career/life preparation. Four simple rules guide the school's environment: 1) Come every day. 2) Make reasonable progress. 3) Never interfere with the learning of others. 4) Use of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco will result in suspension. The responsibility for learning, attendance, and behavior is placed on the student, not their parents, most of whom have lost their effectiveness with these types of students. The atmosphere pervading the school is that this is a place where someone cares in special ways when others cannot or will not.

The advent of the microcomputer has allowed Ombudsman to provide a program of individualized instruction never before possible. Students work at their own pace for a concentrated three-hour block each day. With this individualized approach, students have gained an average of more than two years growth in achievement and have maintained a 90% attendance/retention rate.

An example of the program's effectiveness is the success of 25 students referred to Ombudsman by a suburban Chicago high school. Prior to enrolling at Ombudsman, these 25 students, as a group, had accumulated a record of 1,799 absences, 687 conferences with the dean, 1,354 detentions, and 143 days of suspension. Despite this history of problems, 19 of these students graduated.

The elements that appear to contribute to the success of the Ombudsman program are: voluntary enrollment, positive reinforcement and immediate feedback by computer-assisted instruction, individual attention, small class size, and a simple but highly structured environment. These elements could be incorporated into any high school where there is a commitment to reduce the dropout rate.

Another approach to dropout prevention is a program developed by the author and two staff members at James B. Conant High School in Hoffman Estates, Illinois. Begun in 1982, this program uses motivational and goal-setting seminars to help students with chronic discipline problems – those who, for one reason or another, do not respond to special services and traditional counseling offered at the school.

Students who participate in the motivational seminars are referred by teachers, the nurse, counselors, assistant principals, parents, and the police consultant. However, participation is voluntary. The seminars are held on Tuesday and Thursday mornings during the first two regularly scheduled classes. Six to 15 students participate with the facilitator in discussion on a variety of topics: friends, fads, influence, responsibility, truth, goals, trust, choices, taking charge, motives. Film clips are used to illustrate points. The agenda is flexible to respond to the needs of the participants. Students analyze their current failure cycles and discuss what they might do to achieve their goals. The intent of the seminars is to provide a supportive setting in which students can examine the role of the school in helping them achieve success. Deliberate attempts are made to identify individual strengths in order to encourage students to take a new look at who they can become with a fresh start and an organized plan.

In 1984 this successful program was expanded to two additional sessions devoted to goal-setting skills. The intent in offering these planning-skills sessions is to sustain the personal goals developed dur-

ing the motivational seminar format. The motivational sessions give students new hope; the goal-setting sessions provide the necessary skills needed for a fresh start toward success.

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How Principals and Teachers Can Help

Research on effective schools has consistently shown the critical role the principal plays in establishing the school climate in which the teaching-learning process goes on. Along with the counseling staff, principals are aware of those students who are having academic or personal problems that could lead to their dropping out. As liaison to the community, principals are the first person that parents contact when problems with their children arise. And principals are likely to know what resources are available in the school and community to help students in trouble.

The key to an effective dropout prevention program is strong leadership from the principal on many fronts: curriculum, counseling, communication to parents, staff development, extracurricular activities, coordination with community agencies, and alternative programs, to name a few. But the principal cannot do the job alone.

Probably the single most critical factor in reducing dropout is an effective and caring teacher. No innovative program can replace the work of talented and dedicated teachers who make it their business to see that each of their students succeeds. Students on a collision course with dropping out need special attention and services. Those who work with these students require extraordinary patience, empathy, and a high tolerance for frustration.

Whatever approach is used to help teachers work with high-risk students, the focus must be on the specific problems of *their* students in *their* classrooms. A good first step is familiarizing teachers with behavior patterns that lead to dropping out. Some schools have done this by using a panel discussion of former dropouts at a faculty meeting or inservice day. In the typical high school where teachers have 150 students and see them for only 45 to 50 minutes a day, it is difficult to know them as individuals and to understand their problems. To deal with this situation, some schools use a team approach for screening those who require special attention in order to interrupt the failure cycle.

Teaching methods can make a difference in the holding power of a particular school. Dropouts frequently complain that their teachers did too much lecturing and did little to show the application of lessons to a student's present or future life. A second criticism they make is that teachers assume that all students are hungry to learn. When teachers respond to the learner's point of view, they offer hope to the underachiever who needs special reasons to stay in school.

All students respond to positive comments from teachers. Teachers must make a special effort to communicate the positive achievements of students to them and to their parents. By emphasizing applications of course content to various careers, teachers show how school relates to the world of work. By assessing students' entry level skills prior to instruction, teachers can tailor assignments to match student ability. By encouraging regular attendance and enforcing the attendance policy, teachers instill an important lifelong habit. By teaching goal setting, study skills, and planning techniques, teachers show students how to become organized. Working as a team with counselors, social workers, psychologists, and administrators, teachers play a key role in implementing a dropout prevention program that will eliminate barriers to student success in school.

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Conclusion

Norman Chansky, in writing about the "untapped good" of dropouts, used the analogy of a seed. As even the best "seeds" must have suitable soil and adequate moisture to sprout and flourish, so, too, must the school provide a nurturing environment in order for learning to flourish. Administrators must establish a learning climate that meets the particular needs of every student. Even with unfavorable home circumstances, students can succeed when teachers provide personalized attention by a call home to inquire about an absence, by taking an interest in a student's pet, or by praising a student for achievements both large and small.

When weeds hamper the growth of seeds once sprouted, they must be carefully eliminated. So, too, must learning difficulties be eliminated if students are to grow. As the application of fertilizer makes the difference between a poor and an abundant crop, so motivation properly applied makes the difference between mediocre and quality learning.

To counteract the continuing failure patterns of far too many of our nation's high school students, it will require all the resources our schools and communities can offer. We must not give up on the potential dropout until we have exhausted every available means of help, for as the poet John Greenleaf Whittier put it:

> For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
> The saddest are these: "It might have been!"

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